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SUBJECT: HALF OF RESULTS IN, RAVALOMANANA HAS 61 PERCENT

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REFTEL: ANTANANARIVO 1351 AND PREVIOUS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: President Ravalomanana has a comfortable lead of 61 percent with just over half of the polling stations reporting, but results to date are skewed toward his highland plateau base. While prospects for a first round victory appear strong, it will be several days before we can say so with certainty and it may yet be weeks before the High Constitutional Court (HCC) releases the official results. Observers generally characterize the election as free and fair so far, while highlighting significant shortcomings and calling for reforms. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) With 9,149 of 17,581 polling stations reporting, unofficial results compiled by the Ministry of Interior have President Ravalomanana in the lead with 1.87 million votes (61.22 percent); Roland Ratsiraka in a distant second with 283,000 votes (9.28 percent). Jean Lahiniriko and Herizo Razafimhaleo are close to a tie for third with about 230,000 (7.5 percent) votes each. While half the (unofficial) results are in, Post notes Ravalomanana's popular base is in the high plateau in and near Antananarivo; polling stations with high Ravalomanana numbers are geographically closer and more likely to report early results. The vast majority of polling stations not yet reporting are in distant coastal areas where Ratsiraka and Lahiniriko reportedly did well. Thus the President's 61 percent can be expected to come down as more voting stations report; but how much?

13. (SBU) Opposition candidates, most of whom vocally challenged the process before the election, have been relatively silent in the 72 hours since the polls closed. Post expects the top candidates to be more vocal once 70-80 percent of the votes are in -- and there is a better sense whether or not Ravalomanana appears to have received well above the 50 percent plus one necessary to avoid a run-off.

Transparent Tabulation Process

14. (SBU) Embassy officers daily visit the Ministry of Interior elections task force that is collating unofficial results; it is open to journalists, candidates, and observers. On December 6 the Minister himself was present and clearly very proud of the conduct of the election. With the help of South African helicopters to deliver results from remote areas, he predicted that final unofficial results would be complete by week's end. He speculated that the HCC might take another week to make the final tallies official. If his optimistic appraisal proves true, it will be by

far the fastest Madagascar has ever announced its election results. The Ambassador and Embassy staff also regularly visit the HCC's official ballot tabulation operation, which is under heavy security, but open to accredited observers and the press. The 116 district offices compiling results from 17,500 polling stations are scattered around the country. Visiting two in downtown Antananarivo, the scene is a primitive contrast to the glossy operation at the Interior Ministry, with adding machines in place of computers, but the sense of duty and dedication of the workers present is palpable. While Post is reasonably comfortable with this process, it remains very much an open question if candidates will accept the results it produces in the coming weeks.

Observers Approve Process So Far

¶5. (SBU) So far, international and domestic observation teams share Post's view that voting on December 3 was free, fair and transparent. To the extent that irregularities were noted in electoral lists, voter card distribution, and other imperfections in the process, observers shared the view that these failings did not seem to disadvantage particular candidates. While commending Madagascar for calm and professionalism, most observer groups were unanimous in calling for electoral reforms, if possible before the 2007 legislative elections (reftels).

Specific Reactions

¶6. (SBU) While assessing the overall conduct of the election in positive terms, in public and private meetings, several international observer teams have hit on specific critical themes:

-- Europeans caveat their praise with emphasis on "room for improvement," noting among other issues the disparity between candidates' access to financial and media resources;

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-- The African Union noted many polling stations had too many voters (as high as 2,000), and called for a single ballot;

-- La Francophonie made several recommendations, related to increasing the number of polling stations, better voter verification and distribution of voter cards, and campaign finance reform;

-- Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum and Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA) representatives said a genuinely independent electoral commission and a single ballot must be implemented after this election; as should better regulation of private media. SADC Parliamentary Delegation Chairman Duke Lefhoko said future elections should not be administered by the government;

-- SADC Secretariat members pointed out that the Malagasy electoral process does not comply with SADC standards for an independent commission, voter lists, and polling station access during the count.

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) It is tempting, but would still be premature, to conclude that Marc Ravalomanana is the first round winner, although the results are certainly tending in that direction. As for the critiques offered by our international observer colleagues, we tend to agree with most, while assigning highest priority to the need for an independent electoral commission, a single ballot, and a grace period longer than three days to complete the list and voter documentation. The consensus at present seems to be: wait for the final result, give Madagascar a solid passing grade, and then strongly urge political reforms before the 2007 legislative elections. Post also expects negative reactions from opposition candidates as the unofficial results begin to look like a first round victory for the President.

